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The Newton Fellowship Award Project (British Academy-Funded)

Mary McAteer

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A two-year fellowship has been awarded to Prof. Lesley Wood, North-West University, Potchefstroom for work on a project along with Dr. Mary McAteer, Edge Hill University.

The project is based around community development, focused on education and sustainable community up-skilling through a participatory action research approach. Despite the abolition of Apartheid more than 20 years ago, access to quality education still eludes those who cannot afford to pay for it. The socioeconomic adversities facing the communities in which schools are situated play a large role in their dysfunction. Yet, within such communities there is a wealth of human resources that can add real value to the quality of teaching and learning. This project aims to develop community members as teaching assistants, who will work hand-in-hand with teachers to develop a culturally and contextually relevant programme that empowers parents/guardians to partner with the school in the education of their children. An action research design, using a qualitative approach to data generation and analysis, will ensure the participation of all stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the programme. The development of such a programme will help to improve parental involvement, as well as equip unemployed community members with skills that will improve their chances of formal employment and enhance personal development.

Our key project objectives are:

- to develop the personal capacity of teaching assistants to be community educators;
- to develop the teaching assistants to educate parents/guardians to better support the academic development of their children;
- to engage teachers and teaching assistants to design a culturally and contextually relevant parenting programme;
- to pilot, evaluate, and adjust the programme design;
- to investigate the perceived value of the programme for the various stakeholders.

Our methodological choice is Participatory Action Research (PAR), described by Chambers (2008) as “a pluralistic orientation to knowledge making and social change” (p. 297). Given the context of the project, and the need for major social change through community-driven initiatives, this project is conceptualised as one which enables communities to become

empowered, helps children to become better educated, and addresses issues of social and economic inequality.

Fals Borda (1995) urges all researchers to “respect and combine [their] skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities, taking them as full partners and coresearchers.” Thus, the project aims to co-create with participants the conditions for community and educational development in a South African setting through the use of participative action research.

Mary McAteer is the Director of the Specialist Primary Mathematics Practice Programmes at Edge Hill University. She has worked for over 35 years as a teacher, local authority consultant, and educator in a range of senior pastoral and curriculum roles. For the past 15 years, she has focused on teacher professional development, with a concentration on teacher action research.

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